Unitarian Horizons

May 15, 1938

TWENTY-SEVEN CLOCKS

IN an advertisement of Selfridge's, which appeared some years ago in the columns of the *London Daily Mail*, there was a story of a man who had twenty-seven clocks in his house. One day he conceived the bright idea of adjusting the mechanism of his clocks so perfectly that all twenty-seven would strike the hour exactly together. He tried to put this idea into practice, with the result that he very soon went crazy.

Merely to think about the infinitely difficult problem of getting twenty-seven clocks to strike simultaneously is enough to bring anyone to the verge of insanity!

TWENTY-SEVEN CHURCHES

BUT the problem of the clocks is simple in comparison with the problem a man would have on his hands if he should try to get twenty-seven churches to co-operate in such perfect harmony that they would all act at any given moment as a single unit. Perhaps there are ecclesiastical bodies that can function like a machine, but I doubt whether the most powerful and experienced bishop in the world would lightly attempt such an assignment. Regimentation has its natural limits, as anyone who ventures to ignore them will soon discover; and the most docile of congregations will turn stubbornly rebellious if it gets the idea that an ecclesiastical authority is trying to dictate in an arbitrary and autocratic spirit. Human nature has fortunately been provided with a considerable number of automatic devices for the elimination of excessive interference, and these devices all work with special promptness and decisiveness among people who belong to churches.

If this is true of churches in general, it is surely true in an extreme degree of churches that belong

to the tradition of religious liberalism. Even within the life of a single parish, the spirit of individualism makes it often exceedingly difficult to develop team-play to the point where critical decisions can be made quickly and long-term policies carried out consistently; and when it comes to building up close and active co-operation among a group of such churches, the difficulties increase in geometric progression. Wherever in the modern world there may be real danger of arbitrary dictatorship and regimentation, it is most certainly not in the field of the churches of the free spirit. Anyone who seriously tried to introduce it would soon find himself a permanent fellow-inmate with the man of the twenty-seven clocks.

THE CENTRAL CITADEL

IT seems to me of vital importance to conserve this spirit of stubborn resistance to outside authority within the fellowship of our free churches. It is the breath of life for all that is most precious in our heritage, and it might well prove to be the last and central citadel of the free spirit of man in a world that sometimes appears to be bent upon the utter destruction of that spirit. The tradition of independence at the core of a liberal church is among the most sacred things in all the world today, and nothing should be permitted to threaten it without sharp and peremp-

tory challenge. If ever the cohorts of ecclesiastical power should attempt to capture that innermost fortress, the motto for all who cherish the dream of liberty should be "They shall not pass." And I do not think they will.

NEVERTHELESS

BUT if that central citadel is to be defended successfully, there must be effective planning and a minimum of discipline among the defenders. Individualism can be carried to the point of sheer anarchy, and that is merely another name for suicide. By one of those troublesome paradoxes which so often lie at the heart of human problems, the perpetuation of the tradition of liberty depends upon the surrender of a certain amount of liberty for the sake of keeping the rest. A man has to enlist in an army, where individual liberty is for the time being almost totally abandoned, in order that his claim to individual liberty may be made good. Freedom can only be maintained by men who know when to accept a discipline that seems to be the absolute negation of freedom.

The critical difference between regimentation which destroys liberty and discipline which is the necessary means to preserve it lies, of course, in the spirit with which the outside authority is accepted. One may take orders out of fear, or

indolence, or despair—and that is the surrender of any real independence. But, on the other hand, one may take orders because it is perfectly clear that the only chance of saving any possibility of genuine independence is to organize effective resistance to a very present danger which threatens to wipe out all that cannot withstand it. In one case, the acceptance of authority is that of a slave. In the other, it is that of a free man who deliberately chooses to obey because he believes obedience to be the only practical alternative to destruction.

THE PRESENT THREAT

AS I see it, our free churches are today in the presence of a threat to their continued existence of such magnitude that it is imperative for us to develop with the utmost speed a quite new spirit and method of real team-play.

This threat does not come from outside, but from inside our own organized life. It is not a threat of persecution, but of disintegration. It is not the weight of "outside pressure"—to use the phrases of the famous story about Father Taylor—but the weakness of the "inside braces." Too many of us are the victims of fatigue and discouragement. Our morale is low. Our self-confidence is ebbing away. We are too ready to listen to the prophets of woe. We hear men talk-

ing about "losing battles" and "lost causes" and "dying denominations," and our reaction to such morbid talk is without much vigor or wrath. Deep down in our own souls, too many of us have a sneaking suspicion that it may perhaps be true. This suspicion is the enemy within the gates. It is the traitor who must be identified and arrested and shot at sunrise!

"LAUGHTER AND RALLYING"

THE first thing to do is to laugh at him. He is so plainly and outrageously wrong about the whole thing. The one thing he is most afraid of is the sound of confident and hearty laughter, because that means we simply cannot take him seriously. When we begin laughing at him we are, of course, laughing at ourselves — at our silly fears and our absurd preoccupation with goblins of our own imagination — and the whole atmosphere changes. Pessimism cannot stand the clear light of day, and the demons of the dark hour just before dawn are driven headlong into flight when the first faint hint of sunrise strikes the hilltops in the west. There just isn't any sense in our being downhearted, and the moment we put that fact into words we know it's true.

Then comes the need for rallying, for getting right down to the sober business of making our faith in our cause the incentive for hard work, for

learning how in cold practice we can build up our organized strength into effective working units in a large co-operative enterprise. We know that we must work together, but we are out of the habit of real team-play. We shall have to use muscles that haven't been given much exercise of late. We shall have to endure a certain amount of pain, as pet prejudices and long-established ways of thinking are set aside. Confessing we were wrong on the main proposition, it will hurt to make the same admission about a lot of little matters where personal pride and self-esteem are involved. But that is the price we must pay for co-operation. It isn't easy, but it is inescapable, and it is a slight cost in comparison with the end we seek.

IN PARISH CHURCHES

IT must begin with our several parish churches —your own parish church and mine. No longer can we be hampered and thwarted by any petty personal considerations that assume vast proportions if we will let them, but dwindle away into nothing when we call them by name and tell them to get out of our way. What matters is the church—its true welfare and its growth in power and usefulness. What is important for us is how we can help to build the church, in which each one of us is a "living stone." And it can only be built by all of us together, each one working for

the sake of the cause we all alike hold dear, until every parish in the entire fellowship is strong.

But, even while we are working to develop true co-operation within our parishes, we must also be at work to develop the same spirit and practice among our parishes—in local and district conferences, in the large regional areas, and in the continent-wide fellowship. We are one team, and when we learn to play as a team we can achieve any goal we wish.

F. M. E.

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